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ABSTRACT

Faced with declining resources, increased public scrutiny, and pressures to accommodate the needs of a changing student population, colleges and universities look to innovative uses of technology as supplements to and alternatives for mainstream instruction. Faculty are increasingly becoming involved in distance/distributed education. This study looks at the institutional reward systems for distance education at four Carnegie Category I research institutions. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 34 individuals representing faculty, distance education program administrators, and chief academic officers. The institutions in the study share a similar tripartite mission of teaching, research, and service. At the institutional level, distance education is a low priority while at the college and department level, the commitment to distance education is greater. Similarly, within the context of the academic unit, more so than at the institutional level, administrators recognize faculty efforts in distance education and reward them according to department or college priorities. Distance education is not explicitly identified as an area of professional practice which serves as a measure of faculty productivity. Credit for distance education activity falls under the category of teaching where it counts toward the individual's overall teaching record or as a teaching innovation. Faculty work in distance education is acknowledged and credited at the department level and during annual performance reviews. Downsides to participating in distance education can range in severity from uncertainty about whether and how much credit will be accorded, to placing one's career in jeopardy for engaging in distance education to the detriment of discipline-based research and scholarly publication. (SWC)

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Tenure, Promotion, and Distance Teaching: A Study of Faculty Rewards and Incentives

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The use of communications technologies for teaching is gaining in both popularity and acceptance. Faced with declining resources, increased public scrutiny, and pressures to accommodate the needs of a changing student population, colleges and universities look to innovative uses of technology as supplements to and alternatives for mainstream instruction. As is evident from the widespread interest in on-line instruction, faculty in increasingly greater numbers are becoming involved in distance/distributed education.

Similar external pressures have raised concerns about faculty productivity, compensation, and rewards. The issues of providing greater access to higher education and using technology add a new urgency to the debate about defining scholarship (e.g., Boyer, 1990) and reforming the reward system (e.g., Diamond, 1993). While faculty deserve to be equitably rewarded for their participation in distance education, innovations and outreach activities have a history of being under-valued and poorly rewarded (Scott, 1984; McNeil, 1990). Are faculty being rewarded for distance teaching? How does faculty participation in distance education figure into the promotion and tenure equation?

This presentation reports the findings of a study that examined the relationship between distance teaching and the institutional reward system. Building on the results of a previous survey that identified the reward practices of forty-five western institutions, this study took a closer look at the institutional reward systems of four Carnegie Category I (research) institutions. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with thirty-four individuals representing faculty, distance education program administrators, and chief academic officers. The picture that emerges through the constant comparison of the data helps us to better understand the culture of rewards for distance teaching.

Institutional Context

Priority and Commitment

The institutions represented in this study share a similar tripartite mission consisting of teaching, research, and service, and reflect the changing climate in higher education. They, as colleges and universities nationwide, are under considerable external pressure to hold down costs while providing high quality education and greater access. In an effort to respond to these challenges, a number of institutions have sought solutions in distance education.

Extending their influence beyond the physical campus and employing alternative delivery methods are not new. As land grant universities (with one exception), these institutions have a history of and commitment to outreach activities. Indeed, along with teaching and research, extension (service) remains an integral part of the universities' mission. Distance education is closely aligned with and a "logical extension" of the university's land-grant mission.

But is distance education a priority at these research institutions? The concept of distance education is included in their vision statements and planning documents. At several, distance education is specifically stated as a goals. However, at another (the only university that is not a land-grant institution), the expressed commitment to distance education is less explicit.

Although it may be a stated institutional commitment, distance education is a low priority. This is not to suggest, however, that university presidents lack interest in or support for distance education. Rather, in a time of diminishing resources, distance education competes with higher priorities; "it's one voice among many" in institutions that have "other, bigger fish to fry".

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> "There's a recognition at the top that this [distance education] is important and that probably our future enrollment is tied to this kind of effort; it's just that this isn't an attention-getter on the same scale as [other priorities]".

Within the institutions, some academic units were quick to realize that distance education could help them fulfill their outreach mission. Programs such as nursing, engineering, and business embrace a variety of distance delivery methods to extend their reach and provide greater educational access to students in their state and even nationally and internationally. It is in these colleges and departments, more so than at the institutional level, that we find commitment to the concept of distance education. In academic units where strategic programs have been identified for distance delivery, distance education receives a high priority.

Values and the Reward Structure

To encourage productivity and high performance, organizations establish mechanisms for motivating and rewarding their employees. Through extrinsic rewards such as salary increases, fringe benefits, promotion, and recognition, organizations reflect their values. In higher education, institutions convey their values through a reward system that can range from royalty payments to formal awards. While it may consist of a number of extrinsic incentives and rewards, the institutional reward system is dominated by the promotion and tenure processes. Within these processes, faculty productivity and performance are measured in terms of research, teaching, and service.

As with other Carnegie Category I universities, research figures prominently in the rewards system of the institutions represented in this study. Though they are expected to contribute in all three areas, faculty clearly perceive that research is the top priority, valued and rewarded over both teaching and service. The following response is typical:

> "Teaching counts, but it's not enough. It's the research and scholarly activities of faculty that are really what make or break their chances for promotion. . . . The bottom line with promotion and tenure is you can teach 'til you're blue in the face, but if you haven't been productive in refereed journal articles and books, you don't make the promotion grade, so those are challenges we deal with that, I'm sure, are not unique to us."

Reflective of current directions in higher education, there are initiatives at these institutions to place greater emphasis on teaching. In various vision and planning documents, the institutions express their commitment to teaching. Yet despite efforts to elevate the status of teaching, a mismatch continues to exist between what is espoused and what, in actuality, is emphasized and, thus, rewarded.

In the traditional tripartite mission of category I institutions, service has typically been the least emphasized component. Extension and service activities are lower in priority and less valued than activities which can be clearly labeled as research or mainstream teaching. One institution, represented in this study has been engaged in extensive self-study and policy revision to better integrate the role of university extension teaching and service into the reward structure of the university.

Is distance teaching valued as a scholarly activity? From an institutional point of view, the answer to the question is "no". "It [distance teaching] wasn't perceived to be what . . . the faculty of a high quality institution -- a research institution -- would do . . . even though we have always been a land-grant university." Departments and colleges, however, value distance teaching because their distance education program serves as a vehicle for accomplishing the unit's goals. Involvement in distance education is also a source of recognition that brings the unit and the contributions of its faculty to the attention of university, state and national leaders. It is within the context of the academic unit, more so than at the institutional level, that administrators recognize faculty efforts and reward them according to department or college priorities.

Policies and Guidelines

Policies and procedures outlined by the university convey the institution's values and codify reward processes. Aside from traditional correspondence study, distance education is a relatively new venture on most campuses and, with the exception of policies and procedures governing continuing education, there are few written policies that address distance education issues. The first phase of this study

(Wolcott & Haderlie, 1996) identified a wide variability in compensation, workload, or reward, and found no standardization and little consistency in such practices across institutions, academic units, or delivery media.

One area in which procedures and policies are usually well-established is that of tenure and promotion. Such policies outline the processes by which faculty are awarded tenure and advancement in rank, and, as indicators of what the institution values, provide guidelines for assessing the productivity and performance of the faculty.

The promotion and tenure guidelines of the universities in this study do not specifically mention participation in distance education as an activity for which faculty should receive credit; nor, it should be emphasized, is distance education specifically excluded. In the language of the documents, however, distance education is implied in wording such as "outreach", ... and "extended education". Although there are inferences, distance education is not explicitly identified as an area of professional practice which serves as a measure of faculty productivity.

Reward Dynamics

Making it count

Receiving credit for distance teaching and its related activities is a paramount concern for faculty. At issue is whether such activities are credited and how much weight they are accorded toward tenure and promotion. Potentially, a faculty members' involvement in distance education could count toward any of the three components that are typically considered in the promotion and tenure review process: teaching, research, and service. As might be expected, credit for distance education activity falls under the category of teaching where it contributes to the individual's overall teaching record or counts as a teaching innovation. Although several interviewees contend that distance teaching should be weighted somewhat more heavily than conventional teaching, the prevailing opinion holds that, at the very least, distance teaching should count no less.

Distance education is sometimes counted as service; faculty receive credit for "reaching people who normally wouldn't have been reached". However, when credited in this "least weighted category", distance education activities have little affect on advancing one's case for tenure and/or promotion. On-going efforts to redefine service/outreach and revise tenure and promotion guidelines accordingly may offer faculty greater visibility for technological innovation and distance education activities.

There is no apparent advantage to participating in distance education in terms of research credit especially in disciplines such as engineering or business. When there is a strong connection with the discipline, as in nursing education, faculty may received credit for research, publications, grants, and presentations related to distance teaching and learning or to their program's outreach efforts.

While faculty members and administrators alike are quick to note the significant amount of preparation that distance teaching requires, faculty receive little, if any credit for instructional materials produced in association with their distance education courses.

Though "not highly related to promotion and tenure decisions" at the institutional level, distance teaching is not a disadvantage. The comments of one faculty member illustrate its negligible effect:

> "Doing distance ed [sic] doesn't really help you specifically; if anything, you've got to do all the other things and distance ed [sic], [too]. . . . I don't think it does do you any harm in terms of merit, tenure, promotion, but I'm not sure it really facilitates you either."

At best, distance teaching might round out an already strong portfolio.

> "If I had to guess, I would say if a person is diligent about the research and scholarship side . . ., probably their chances are enhanced by doing this. They gain a reputation, they may gain some prestige with their peers, [and] if their department sees this as supportive of its mission, they get a few extra brownie points there."

Supporting Distance Teaching

Indeed, it is at the department level and during annual performance reviews that faculty work in distance education is acknowledged and credited. As promotion and tenure considerations progress beyond the unit, the importance of one's contribution to departmental initiatives (such as distance education) pales. The department as the locus of commitment to distance education becomes the source of rewards for related activities.

Department heads and deans have an important role to play. They are key in seeing that faculty work is rewarded consistent with both unit and institutional goals. Their task, as the respondents describe it, involves articulating priorities and making faculty "feel comfortable" that what they do counts not only in the academic unit, but in a larger rewards context as well.
But upper administration also sets the tone; coordinated efforts between administration at both levels is crucial.

> "Your provost needs to be behind it [distance teaching]. They have to make a very clear, definitive statement that this is how we reward you for your development time; this is how we reward you for your delivery. . . . you would hope that faculty could be rewarded for their distance activities in such a way that it carries some weight in their annual evaluations . . . that has to come from the top. The department head cannot take the chance of saying to a faculty member, 'Hey, I'm going to reward you for doing this distance course when, in fact, maybe they can't deliver on their promise."

This is especially crucial for non-tenured faculty.

> "Junior faculty need to know that this is an important component of their tenure decision, promotion decision, and probably need to be reassured that just because they're teaching a distance education course doesn't mean that they won't be given enough time to do research and scholarship, and that their contribution in the distance education arena will be viewed as a very important contribution to their teaching aspect of their performance evaluations."

The tone set by administration influences the degree of faculty participation in distance programs. When academic units endorse distance education and faculty perceive that their efforts are valued and rewarded, then it is easier to recruit faculty to and maintain their interest in distance teaching.

Running the Risk

The effect of participating in distance education is not always so benign. There are downsides that range in severity from uncertainty about whether and how much credit will be accorded, to placing one's career in jeopardy for engaging in distance education to the detriment of discipline-based research and scholarly publication.

As a relatively new enterprise somewhat out of the mainstream at research institutions, distance education is a source of anxiety for tenure-conscious faculty for whom existing institutional policies provide few answers. In the "tenure and promotion sweepstakes", distance education adds an(other) element of risk.

> "How much credit will they get for it? You know that if you spend your time writing a peer-reviewed journal article, the value of that is fairly well known as a commodity, whereas doing a service or an extended education workshop, things like this . . . there's a risk involved because it's not been quantified. There's not enough experience for people to know the value of those kind of efforts."

Beyond the issue of credit, distance teaching can present a less direct, though substantial obstacle to achieving tenure or advancing in rank. It can "work against you" by diverting time away from those activities that are more highly valued and more readily rewarded by the institution. In the demanding role of faculty at research institutions, distance teaching often amounts to trading-off "the other things that are more likely to get them promoted." For most faculty, that means the loss of time to devote to their scholarship. An associate professor tells of her experience:

> "Well, it can really eat your time up. . . . in fact, our classes have become quite unmanageable [in terms of size] . . . . This semester wasn't nearly as bad, but in most semesters I just plan on not doing any research."

The risks pose a particular danger for the junior faculty member. Nontenured faculty members can find themselves caught in a squeeze among departmental initiatives, the demands of their position, and their own personal motivations. Both administrators and peers caution junior, nontenured faculty against involving themselves in distance education and other service and outreach activities at the expense of research and scholarly publications. The common advice: "get through the tenure process" first.

The potential negative affect on the careers of nontenured faculty members has implications for recruiting faculty to distance education. Cognizant of the risks to junior faculty, some of those tasked with recruiting distance teachers focus on the higher-ranked faculty. However, driven by mid- and latter-career motivations, senior faculty may be more difficult to recruit. They may see little benefit in distance teaching compared to the draw of activities having greater financial and ego-enhancing rewards. When senior faculty opt not to teach at a distance, those responsibilities fall to the younger, non-tenured faculty.

Success of distance education programs and other innovations requires that faculty find something in it for themselves -- something more than intrinsic satisfaction. Faculty need to know that their investment of time and effort pays off in terms of what the university values and rewards. While intrinsic rewards may be satisfying enough to encourage faculty participation, more tangible and equitable rewards are needed to sustain faculty motivation. As a dean points out: "If they don't stand behind that commitment [to reward distance teaching], you're in for it . . . then the only incentive you've got left is purely money . . . but that won't leave you with a long-term program."

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